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Interfaith dialogue: seven key questions for theory, policy and practice

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ABSTRACT

Interfaith dialogue is increasingly being recognised by governments across Europe as crucial to developing cohesive communities. This article critically analyses approaches for developing strategies to promote interfaith dialogue between individuals and/or organisations within civil society. It does this by drawing on a series of theoretical questions concerning those who are involved (and missing), what the dialogue is for, and how the dynamics of participation and representation are handled. In the process, the article considers the conditions, spaces, processes, relationships and understandings of identity that can enable successful interfaith dialogue, and how these might be developed in ways which address the issues raised. The original theoretical analysis presented in this article is supported by examples from the author's cumulative research with policymakers and practitioners across Europe since 2004.

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Introduction

> We live in the conscious presence of difference. In the street, at work, and on the television screen we constantly encounter cultures whose ideas and ideals are unlike ours. That can be experienced as a profound threat to identity. …
>
> [R]eligion is one of the great answers to questions of identity. But that, too is why we face danger. Identity divides. The very process of creating an 'Us' involves creating a 'Them' – the people not like us. In the very process of creating community within their borders, religions can create conflict across those borders. …
>
> *If religion is not part of the solution, then it will certainly be part of the problem*. (© Sacks, J. 2002, 10 and 9, respectively)

As Sacks explains, the psychological, social and political dynamics of religion are frequently implicated within contemporary concerns over division and conflict between different individuals, groups and countries in a globalised world. There are particular concerns when patterns of relationships develop over time that decrease the likelihood of interaction and dialogue taking place between diverse individuals and groups within particular contexts. One potential outcome of this process is what Cantle (2005, 69–70) described as people living 'parallel lives', in which people belonging to different groups may live *alongside* each other, but rarely

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interact in any meaningful way *with* each other. Such situations have long been recognised as creating significant potential for mutual misunderstanding and conflict between groups, especially given histories where group differences of religious faith and culture have been exploited, sometimes violently, for political ends (e.g. Bruce 2003). At the same time, high levels of transnational migration and supranational movements and identities, including those with religious dimensions, have been important factors in the resurgent public and political recognition of these groups; this recognition has been reflected in terms of the complex and often controversial entanglements of such groups with the public sphere and wider civil society (whether for service, protest or other reasons) (Cherry 2014).

The development of improved dialogue between people identifying with different religious faiths has often been promoted as a positive way of building more cohesive communities in response to the perceived threat and conflict which can arise from such divisions. This article seeks to critically explore the contribution made by interfaith dialogue activities by developing a theoretical framework of key questions necessary to understand this activity, illustrating this with examples from my cumulative research experience in European contexts since 2004. In the process, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of the range of possible questions which need to be asked by policy-makers and practitioners, and the potential answers which may be given, if these interfaith activities are to successfully build improved relationships and mutual understanding within wider society.

However, it should be recognised at the outset that the relationship between such activities, the public sphere and the state has long been recognised as a controversial one. This is especially true given continuing contestations over secularisation, values and rights, which remain heavily debated within and between different contexts. Mass media coverage has fuelled these debates (European Commission 2009), often exacerbating public feelings against immigrants and particular minority religious groups, whilst linking them in public perception to security or other threats; this has happened not least when reporting terrorist attacks claiming religious motivation and the role played by religion in various geo-political instabilities. These debates have led to different historical, philosophical, political, cultural, legal and constitutional responses to religious diversity in different contexts across the globe, including within Europe (Parekh 2006; Foblets and Alidadi 2013). For particular states, there may also often be differences between stated constitutional positions and everyday policy in practice (Fox 2011).

Contemporary negotiations between Council of Europe member states provide one example of diverse state responses in policy and practice. Resolutions by the Assembly of the Council of Europe also illustrate how commonalities between positions are understood by members. These resolutions have actively promoted shared values whilst recognising diversity between member states in how these are applied (Orton 2014a). They have also walked a fine line between consistently encouraging interfaith dialogue and recognising limitations of state roles in religious affairs. This is illustrated, for example, in Resolution 1510 and Recommendation 1804 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, from 2006 and 2007, respectively:

> The Assembly encourages intercultural and interreligious dialogue based on universal human rights, involving – on the basis of equality and mutual respect – civil society, as well as the media, with a view to promoting tolerance, trust and mutual understanding, which are vital for building coherent societies and strengthening international peace and security.
>
> The Assembly therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers … rule out any interference in religious affairs, but consider religious organisations as part of civil society and call on them to play an active role in the pursuit of peace, co-operation, tolerance, solidarity, intercultural dialogue and the dissemination of the Council of Europe's values. (© Council of Europe)

Frequent test cases in national courts and the European Court of Human Rights have continued to test the principles and limits in terms of how different claims may be respectively judged. Some theorists have argued that the continuing grappling by states with these issues represents the emergence of 'postsecular' spaces of governance (e.g. Cloke and Beaumont 2013; Habermas 2008). Within these spaces, various ideas of a secular/ised public sphere have been challenged by the persistent presence and engagement of religious individuals and groups seeking to contribute to political processes whilst engaging in collective action and service delivery, not least at a local community level (see also Bäckström et al. 2010; Jawad 2012). In the process, there is increasing awareness of the diversity of different forms of intercultural and interfaith dialogue which, like other forms of cross-community interaction, have the potential to arise in a wide range of everyday informal and formally organised situations (e.g. Cantle 2005, 177). This creates a complex field, as Moyaert (2013, 202) begins to demonstrate:

> Depending on the participants (laypeople, religious leaders, theologians and monks), the structure (local/international, small/large-scale, bilateral/multilateral), and the themes to be discussed (everyday concerns, ethical challenges, spiritual experiences, doctrinal issues, etc.), interreligious dialogue can take different forms. These can range from encounters between academics in which the exchange of religious ideas is central to those between grassroots groups that are engaged in joint emancipation projects and dialogue, from diplomatic consultations between religious leaders to interreligious prayer meetings in which Buddhist and Christian monks share experiences and insights on meditation practices. They can span the spectrum from encounters focused on action regarding concrete local, national, or ethical challenges (cf. global warming, human rights, etc.) to Scriptural Reasoning groups … from personal conversations to international conferences. (© Moyaert, M. 2013)

However, the implications of this diversity remain highly contested in relation to policy and practice.

The contribution of this article

Within this widely debated arena, this article critically explores potential theoretical and practical questions arising for European policymakers and practitioners when they seek to develop strategies that proactively create, promote and support opportunities for interfaith dialogue in response to this context. Whilst the questions posed in this article are theoretical ones, they have emerged as an original cumulative analysis from analytical reflection in dialogue with related policymakers and practitioners over a decade of previous research in this field.[1] This research began with doctoral work exploring faith, dialogue and difference in

Christian community work in England, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (Orton 2008). This began with interviews with a range of key individuals supporting faith-related community work nationally and more locally. This doctoral research also included two periods of participant observation in related local projects (including one engaged specifically in supporting diverse faith groups to engage in dialogue and social action in West Yorkshire). This analysis subsequently developed through further work through a series of participatory dialogical workshops held with policymakers and/or community activists (including some from faith groups). These were designed to create opportunities for participants to engage in dialogue with each other and with experts over key issues and dilemmas involved in generating improved interaction across different individuals and groups, based on their experience. A more detailed explanation of this methodology can be found in Orton (2014b). This included particular workshops: (i) with policymakers and community activists, on developing meaningful cross-community interactions in England (Orton 2009); (ii) with European policymakers, exploring creative approaches to integrating and empowering migrants (Orton 2010, 2012). This culminated in this analysis being presented as a paper at the *Faith-Based Participation in Civil Societies Workshop* held in Sarajevo on 13–14 September 2013. The purpose of this workshop presentation was to share perspectives across Europe in order to consider what might be mutually learnt from experiences in these different contexts.[2] The work was subsequently further refined in a participatory dialogical workshop on *Faith in Intercultural Cities* held as part of the Council of Europe's 'Intercultural Cities Programme' with local government officials from across this network in March 2014 (Orton 2014a). The 'policymakers' involved in this process tended to be paid public officials holding related roles at various levels, rather than elected politicians. These 'policymakers' were those who were involved in developing and operationalising strategies and initiatives around interaction between diverse groups. The 'practitioners' included those involved with local/national nongovernmental organisations, and those involved directly in local religious groups, who were seeking to engage with diversity in the public sphere and build links between different groups (including religious groups) across the various different European contexts involved in each instance.[3]

During these diverse research engagements, both policymakers and practitioners frequently raised questions about interfaith dialogue in terms of how it operates and how it should be conceived and implemented. These questions were frequently asked on the basis of specific challenges which they faced when seeking to design, promote and/or implement particular related projects or policy strategies to achieve particular aims. Hence, the questions heard have been cumulatively refined and compiled into the set presented here. These questions cover issues of participation, process and purpose, as well as the related issues of identity and power. In the case of each question, I have begun to draw links with wider theoretical literature which enables these questions to be further explored; however, due to space considerations, this is necessarily limited, as each question could easily warrant an article of its own. The distinctive contribution being made here focuses instead on the power of these questions to focus and clarify particular interventions, whilst acknowledging the importance of connecting these with broader theoretical literatures that may assist in this task, giving some examples to illustrate this in the process.

The purpose of these questions is not necessarily to critique any particular initiative for not doing everything or engaging with everyone – indeed, this may not be either

possible or desirable. Instead, they might be read as a more explicit acknowledgement of the need for a proliferation of different initiatives and spaces for dialogue and mutual engagement, which may respond to each question differently. However, within any particular response, I would argue that it is important to be clearer about what each is aiming to achieve and how they complement each other to build a stronger multiplicity of relationships and networks across religious and other differences. Indeed, as the following argument will make clear, each of these questions needs to be asked separately to achieve a more nuanced analysis, whilst recognising their interrelationships with each other. Otherwise, the exclusion of particular groups, the confusion of different aims with each other, the missing of potentially important contributing factors to successful dialogue, and paying insufficient attention to the process and context of such dialogue, can all significantly limit the effectiveness of these interfaith initiatives.

Question 1: who is involved?

This deceptively simple question firstly draws attention to the range of different possible participants within interfaith dialogue, and the different worldviews and cultures they may bring to the process. Secondly, it highlights that some forms of interfaith dialogue may be primarily designed to include individuals and groups who share a commitment to an organised religion, even if their particular religious affiliation or theology differs. They may also seek to extend participation to the increasing numbers of those with atheistic or agnostic worldviews, or with more diverse and fluid forms of religious identity, affiliation and/or practice (see, for example, the helpful discussion of this by Cornille 2013).

Thirdly, this question also draws attention to whether the intended participants in interfaith dialogue are there primarily in their capacity as individuals, or whether the intention is to use the interfaith dialogue as a means of facilitating intergroup/interorganisational interaction. Intergroup or interorganisational interactions may take many forms; for example, they may be between organised religious bodies (such as official denominational structures within particular faith traditions, often operating at national or supranational levels) and/or between local congregations. They may or may not also involve parts of the local/national state or other nongovernmental organisations within their dialogue, as participants, partners or organisers.

Understanding who precisely is involved (or intended to be involved) matters, as these participants affect the character of the resulting interaction, and have a subsequent impact on many of the subsequent questions discussed in this article. This question is also important because different groups and organisations have different modes of organisation, structures and cultures, and it is crucial to consider to what extent these have been taken into account. These collective differences can be particularly pronounced across different faith traditions; for example, some of these may be hierarchical in structure, whereas others may be more associational in their collaboration; some may operate in a locally-distributed 'parish' structure, whereas others may operate from gathered 'centres', often in large urban areas. The importance of such questions has long been supported by many sociologists of religion, who have a track record of highlighting and exploring a wide range of variations in this respect (e.g. see McGuire 1992; Torry 2005). Creating structures for interfaith engagement which implicitly assume

that all faith groups operate in the same way and with the same values will inevitably create barriers to engagement from the outset for some groups that operate differently from the perceived norm. To give one example from the English context, not all religious organisations are organised hierarchically with a universal parish system in the same way as the Church of England. This will have profound implications if those seeking to organise interfaith dialogue do not take this into account and instead problematically use their own views of how they think religious organisations are structured to shape who they try to involve without realising potential differences in roles and structures. For example, some of the research participants had initially engaged in a problematic search to find comparable roles to a Christian bishop or parish priest within other religions or even some other Christian denominations. On realising that this was not always possible, and becoming more aware of the differing roles and structures within other religious groups, they had needed to adapt their expectations of who might become involved from those groups for dialogue at different levels.

Question 2: who is missing?

This corollary question to the first question is worth highlighting separately because interfaith dialogue initiatives often miss out significant groups of people. For example, interfaith initiatives across Europe have been frequently critiqued by participants across my research for only involving those already interested in interfaith engagement. Whilst this dialogue remained important for those involved as a way of building some relationships and understanding between different faiths, those involved were recognised as already being interested for some reason in such dialogue. These did not necessarily include those who carried authority or leadership roles within their own particular cultures or communities, thus limiting the mandate of those engaged in the dialogue and the impact of these interfaith activities on the wider religious communities from which they came. Significant sub-groups within different faith groups were also often underrepresented, and these underrepresented groups tended to reflect those whose voices tended to be marginalised within their own religious communities too. For example, in wider literature, Weller (2009) notes that in the United Kingdom, public bodies have often lacked the religious literacy to secure an appropriate range of representation, that young people are not always included, and that there may be a gender bias towards male participants in many forums, despite individual women sometimes playing key role in establishing interfaith initiatives. For example, one local interfaith forum observed during research fieldwork had a majority of members who were older men, and at one meeting, several of those male members proposed that the forum should adopt a statement of shared values which included particular conservative and arguably patriarchal positions on women's roles in the family and wider society. These proposals might have been adopted had it not been for a nun present, who gently but successfully argued that these views may not fully reflect the views of everyone within the different religious groups within the area. Those from nonmajority denominational perspectives or minority ethnic groups within particular religious communities may also be excluded. Having limited participation from marginalised groups limits the potential reach of these interfaith activities within religious communities, whilst also meaning that their perspectives are less likely to be accurately presented

within any discussions. Whilst some marginalised groups may engage in alternative forms of interfaith dialogue, differential involvement may exacerbate internal marginalisation by replicating it within at least some interfaith activities.

Furthermore, there is a risk that many interfaith dialogue initiatives only involve those already convinced of the merit of this dialogue and/or who already have some degree of awareness of different faiths. This means that these initiatives do not necessarily reach those who might have most to learn from them but who are reluctant to engage in them, whether (for example) because of fear, prejudice, or just simple ambivalence to this exchange. For example, in Orton (2014a, 6–7), participants' views were summarised in the following way:

> Engaging with a sufficiently wide group of people in dialogue activities was a particular concern. Some participants noted that only a small minority of people were interested in these activities, and that they sometimes (often unintentionally) excluded humanists, atheists, and other 'lifestance' communities which did not see themselves as religious in nature.

In all these cases, it is worth considering *why* particular groups are not becoming involved (if wider involvement is desirable), and considering strategies for addressing this where appropriate. For example, when targeting opportunities on those who might be least likely to interact (e.g. those with prejudices), how do you generate involvement in a non-stigmatising way? How can activities be created which reach across barriers of prejudice and which are easily accessible with low thresholds of previous knowledge and commitment required (Orton 2010)?

Question 3: what is the dialogue for?

Different people involved in interfaith interactions may have diverse motivations and aim to achieve different things from their involvement, particularly as they approach it for the first time. This may include motivations as ambivalent as those expressed in the English expression 'It's better the devil you know'! Their motivations may extend from seeking mutual toleration or keeping the peace to a more active aim to build mutual understanding or defuse social conflict. Social activists within different religions may seek to use interfaith interactions as a means for building together common ground and coordination for collective action on issues of shared social concern, with each other and/or through wider alliances with other nongovernmental, state, religious and/or political actors. Interfaith interactions may be used as a forum for representing the views of different groups to each other, and/or seeking change in the behaviour of the other in some respect. Participants may seek to deepen their own faith through dialogue with others (as in some forms of scriptural reasoning, for example) and/or seek deeper collective theological understanding. Some may seek to use interfaith interactions as an opportunity for assimilating or converting others to their religion. Theorists are beginning to develop typologies for the resulting interactions, but it is important to note that all these motivations may or may not be compatible with many traditional philosophical understandings of the term 'dialogue' (e.g. see Moyaert 2013). Nor are all of the possible motivations for engaging in dialogue necessarily conducive to broader aims of enabling learning which reduces prejudice, builds relationships and contributes towards diverse interactions in a cohesive civil society. Thus, those seeking to engage

people in interfaith dialogue need to be aware that the motivations and intentions of those participating may differ from those of the instigators, if the dialogue is not to quickly encounter problems arising from these differences. They also need to be aware that there may well be tensions between different motivations for particular participants in any particular interaction, such as when agendas or outcomes from different aspects of public policy conflict for any public sector bodies involved (e.g. Dinham 2012). Even when this awareness is present, there remain questions of how such differences may be handled within the dialogue.

Furthermore, different spaces may have been created to have different purposes or functions. For example, some fora where interfaith dialogue takes place may have been created by local government as a means of consultation and engagement of particular faith groups within governance and decision-making processes; other engagements between local government and faith groups may be more oriented to making use of faith groups' resources and connections in delivering social welfare objectives (e.g. see Lowndes and Chapman 2005; Dinham and Lowndes 2008). Such spaces (and the terms associated with them) are controversial not just in terms of policy but also for some within religious groups; see, for example, Bretherton's (2006) political theology critique that churches should refuse the terms on which such partnerships are sought by the state. Furthermore, where involvement in governance processes is a primary concern, questions of representation become particularly important, as question 6 considers further below.

Question 4: how is the complexity of diversity understood to affect interfaith dialogue?

Interfaith dialogue does not take place between discrete groups which are entirely homogenous internally. Each group will consist of individuals who share some characteristics and differ in other ways, whether in terms of age, gender, occupation, leisure interests, religion, political views, where they live, etc.; all of these aspects form important parts of their identity as a whole (Weeks 1990). These different dimensions of identity affiliation do not necessarily compete with each other, but may overlap and combine in complex ways within a particular individual (Modood, Beishon, and Virdee 1994; Westin 2008). Because everyone has multiple aspects/dimensions to their own identity, in every interaction, there is the potential to both share something in common with another person and differ from them in other respects.[4]

Faith groups in particular contain individuals and movements that may have diverse ways of combining worldviews, identities (individual and collective), traditions, cultures and systems of values/moralities. All these interact with each other and can affect interfaith dialogue, making it particularly difficult for any one individual to embody all possible understandings or manifestations of a particular religion within such dialogue. Some beliefs and practices may be more central than others to the mainstream traditions within particular religions, and many have been differently understood within different times, places and situations. Hence, for example, it is often not possible to share 'the' definitive Christian position on a particular social issue or even church practice, as (empirically and historically) a range of different people and churches may have claimed diverse and even contradictory positions as

each being 'authentically Christian'.[5] Indeed, different religions and denominations have complex different power dynamics affecting who is understood to have the right to speak for any particular tradition as a whole in any particular context, and these are often contested (Verter 2003). As Verter explores, by engaging in dialogue particularly with a range of Bourdieu's work, one way of exploring these debates can be through contested concepts such as religious or spiritual capital. Such debates can be located (as, for example, Baker 2009 explores further) within wider theoretical debates over the impact of different religious views and the practical contributions religious groups make within society. These debates can also include how these contributions interact, as well as whether they are perceived as being for good and/or ill by those involved and wider society. In addition, religions develop and adapt through their engagement with surrounding cultures, as they embed themselves and seek to communicate core beliefs effectively in changing contexts. Within this process, the self-understanding of the identities of those involved, and their own understanding of their place within the broader religious traditions and wider religious communities of which they are a part, becomes an important part of any interfaith dialogue.

Furthermore, exchanges between those holding different faiths (or even between those sharing the same nominal faith but differing in their understanding and expression of it) can be structured in various different ways in response to this diversity. For example, people may seek to structure any exchanges in ways designed to *implicitly close down the potential for deeper dialogue*. An example may be through setting up a dialogue which consists of polarised forms of exchange, in which any view other than the one already held is automatically considered wrong and in need of change (Griffiths 2001). This necessarily precludes any form of two-way change or relationship arising from the exchange. Other forms of interfaith dialogue seek to *focus solely on those aspects held in common*, in the hope that by avoiding controversial issues, they may enable some initial bridges to be built. However, there is a risk within such approaches that the avoidance of areas of difference can limit the depth of the resulting relationships. This may create particular problems when they do not develop further over time, as particular topics which may be important in terms of wider social cohesion and conflict continue to be avoided for fear of fracturing fragile connections. Other approaches have sought to develop dialogue, which *recognises opportunities for exploring both similarity and difference*, building on strong but open identities which enable learning from those who are initially understood as 'the Other'. Indeed, through such deeper dialogue, those involved may come to see the 'Other' as more 'like us' than they initially expect, at least in some respects (such as through recognising our shared humanity, or even in theological terms such as through recognising 'the Other' as having a relationship with God). This can happen even whilst our verbal expressions of our beliefs and personal belonging to particular faith communities may remain the same. This points to the need to critically interrogate what we mean by 'dialogue', and what we consider its potential to be for affecting not only other individuals but also ourselves, groups and the social world around us, as a number of leading theorists such as Buber, Freire and Bohm have explored in different ways (see Smith 2001; Atkinson 2013).

Question 5: what conditions enable effective interfaith dialogue?

Notwithstanding these different theoretical perspectives on the nature of dialogue, policymakers and practitioners also face particular challenges in enabling dialogue to happen effectively in practice. In the context of this article, I take 'effective' to mean: 'How is the quality of the dialogue enhanced so that it improves mutual understanding and learning from difference, whilst also decreasing prejudice, promoting social cohesion and developing a common sense of belonging between those involved?'.

As I have outlined in more detail elsewhere (see Orton 2012), and summarise in this section, supporting such processes involves a complex combination of theoretical and practical understanding, in order to develop processes which have characteristics that help build relational bridges between different communities. Building this type of deeper dialogue involves recognising how social, psychological and structural dimensions interact. It also involves recognising how interactions can affect feelings of belonging and how identities can evolve over time, as well as how the patterns of relationships established through interactions over time can affect social cohesion. Broadly speaking, the conclusion based on this research was that the more diverse the connections people have, based on multiple aspects of their own interests and identities, the stronger the network that results, and the greater the potential for social cohesion. Hybrid organisations, identities and spaces can play a key role in helping to proactively build bridges where these do not already exist, and offer alternatives to having to choose between aspects of identity when these are unnecessarily polarised. Such hybrid forms of combined identifies and spaces can open up new possibilities and potential choices, as the work of theorists such as Bhabha (1990) and Baker (2007) explore.

These understandings open up the possibility of building a multi-layered policy and practice response, in which policymakers and practitioners can help contribute towards the following components which help make interfaith dialogue (and intercultural interaction more generally) more effective. They require the development of a *conducive public and policy context*. Relying on solely multicultural, assimilationist, or passive structural rights-based approaches by themselves is insufficient. Instead, the dialogues pointed to the importance of policies and practices which actively support the recognition of the contribution of different groups, whilst also helping to address inequalities between groups *and* promoting intercultural and interfaith exchange. This helps to create the environment within which positive interactions can begin to develop at a local level. Developing the skills, processes and spaces for interfaith dialogue at this local level are then all particularly important within this conducive environment (e.g. see DCLG 2008). The creation of *diverse spaces and times* where interaction can take place creates multiple opportunities for dialogue to happen, and prevents an *overreliance* on any one route for this to develop. *Skills* help people to interact positively within these spaces, empowering people to participate effectively in the opportunities and overcome potential misunderstandings and conflict which arise within them. The *process of the dialogue/interaction* is crucial, and supporting this process can help encourage people to get involved and produce the most positive outcomes, taking into account wider learning (e.g. by designing contact which decreases prejudice effectively, building on learning from contact theory developed over decades; see Dovidio, Glick, and Rudman 2005). One of the best ways of doing this is by considering *the importance of the people,*

organisations and networks that contribute towards facilitating this process and help to overcome any difficulties. These can be developed by involving a wider range of stakeholders in supporting these processes, linking them together to learn from each other, and providing training and support, which help them to develop their effectiveness. Professionals with specialist skills in this area, such as community and youth workers and social pedagogues, can offer particular contributions in this regard, in addition to local voluntary activists. However, there is a need to *provide consistent support* to these activists, helping them to reflect with policy-makers on the difficulties inherent in their role and ensuring that funding for salaries and related projects continues over the longer term, given that these processes often take considerable time. Finally, *evaluating policies and practices* that aim to develop improved interactions between different groups carefully and systematically is particularly important. It is important to identify those which are supporting improved relationships and those that are exacerbating division in practice, whilst being aware that some initial conflict may be a necessary part of the dialogue process. Crucially, within such evaluation, it is important to listen carefully to the voices of those involved in your context, especially those doing this work on a day-to-day basis and those who may not normally be heard. Together, all these aspects provide practical areas where policymakers and practitioners can have practical impact in developing the conditions where effective interfaith dialogue can be enabled.

Question 6: how are the dynamics of participation and representation by different individuals and groups handled?

Even when the conditions outlined in the response to question 5 are in place, there remain some complex challenges for practitioners to face in establishing and maintaining effective dialogues. One key challenge arises from developing further the questions raised in questions 1–3, and results from the understanding of diversity outlined in the response to question 4. Because identity is multifaceted, and potential purposes of interfaith dialogue vary, this raises questions of whether involvement within interfaith dialogue should be considered primarily just in terms of participation, or whether it also involves some degree of representation. Should those involved have some ability to represent not just their own views, but also those of others who might share particular identity labels linked to their faith (or is it just enough that they participate, on behalf of no-one but themselves)?

Particularly in situations where decisions are being made and constituencies are being claimed to be represented within political and campaigning processes, questions arise about whether it is important for those involved in dialogue to have some form of mandate from their claimed wider constituency, as well as some mechanism for accountability to it. This also raises further questions about whether such people are being selected, and if so, how? As Weller (2009) argues, 'the state cannot have dialogue with a "community", but only with bodies that present themselves, and/or that the state regards as constituting organised representation of that community' (75). If the state seeks to engage with religious groups, this is true whether they engage with different faith traditions separately, or with umbrella interfaith bodies seen to represent the wider voices of religious traditions collectively.

However, many interfaith initiatives do not involve engagement in governance but are more focused on enabling mutual learning and building multiple relationships. For these, it may be sufficient (indeed, potentially desirable) to widen out participation as far as possible. The diversity of different groups can then be reflected within this wider participation, rather than via particular individuals. Indeed, for such wider initiatives, the challenge is often more how this wider participation can be generated amongst often apathetic or even hostile wider communities, as indicated earlier. In such situations, *representation matters in a different way*, in that for prejudice and stereotypes to be challenged, those involved need to see a particular encounter with 'the Other' as having wider significance. This means that they need to generalise learning from a particular positive interaction with an individual (for example, who happens to hold another faith) by seeing it as relevant to their interactions with the wider group (of people who hold that faith). This is difficult as common psychological tendencies can cause people to discount positive experiences with other groups against whom they have a bias, seeing them as exceptions to a perceived 'general rule' of more negative interactions (Gaertner and Dovidio 2005). Hence, a key concern is whether participants see the other person as representing the other group in some way; if they do so, they are more likely to generalise their experience to others in the outgroup (Hewstone and Brown 1986) in a way that challenges their general stereotype, rather than just seeing this as an exceptional individual.[6] Creating conditions where those involved are more likely to see the positive interaction with someone from another faith group as being more widely transferable is therefore important.

All of this points to the need to not have a 'one size fits all' approach to promoting interfaith dialogue, but instead recognising the need for interfaith dialogue at multiple levels. These include building relationships between *leaders* of different faith communities, to sanction wider dialogue and create a supportive environment for it to happen. To do this, the leaders need to set an example by being involved in dialogue themselves and ensuring that they use their influence to promote this within their own communities. *Engaging the media* in a positive role is also crucial at this level, to show the positive forms of dialogue that are taking place. Interfaith dialogue is also needed at the level of *activists* who are seeking to stimulate dialogue and bring others together in particular spaces and processes. To do this, the activists need their own networks and to be involved in dialogue with other activists, as part of their own training and as a form of support network, and so that they can collaborate with those from other diverse communities in their work. These networks can become a crucial part of local civil society, creating a resource for building new interaction activities through working with each other, and forming a robust means of tackling myths and responding quickly when conflicts arise between communities which might otherwise affect social harmony.[7] Furthermore, building everyday interfaith dialogue between a *wide range of people in local communities* is also important, in enabling them to engage in positive interactions and build widespread relationships across their differences.

Question 7: what dilemmas may arise within interfaith dialogue, and how might these be handled by those involved?

This final question points to the need to recognise that further issues and dilemmas exist within this work, which warrant much further research. Given the limited literature

exploring the effectiveness of interfaith dialogue in practice, there is a significant need to develop new research approaches to exploring these processes and promoting further reflection between practitioners on them. However, given the controversial nature of such issues and dilemmas, they can often be hidden away for fear of exposing potential problems in what is already a difficult and often undersupported activity. Furthermore, communicating concepts dependent on deep faith and cultural traditions is inherently difficult for those who have little inside knowledge of them. This also presents a challenge in terms of how to overcome people feeling that they do not know enough to start the dialogue, because they do not want to offend people in the process by asking questions which might be perceived as ignorant or offensive. Within the participatory dialogue in some of the research workshops, some forms of 'political correctness' were seen by some as inhibiting honest dialogue and wider involvement because of this, by regulating and excluding from dialogue any views deemed unacceptable by those organising the conversation.

Hence, it is worth recognising some of the common further issues, challenges and dilemmas here, as examples of the sorts of issues which have become increasingly apparent from developing theory and research in this area. (Indeed, exploring dilemmas can be a particularly helpful way of developing policy and practice further in fields such as this; see Orton 2014b for an exploration of this topic.) These dilemmas may relate to one of the previous questions, or may involve a combination of them. For example, with regards to who is and is not involved in a particular form of dialogue, participants in one discussion (Orton 2014a, 6–7) were noted as having the following dilemmas:

> […] policymakers and practitioners in local authorities often faced dilemmas over whether there should be any limits to who they sought to involve, particularly if some groups were perceived as holding radically different views or being 'extremist', prejudiced or cultic in nature. They were particularly concerned about not wanting to be perceived as giving such groups any official credibility, recognition or support. However, at the same time, some felt that to select some groups and exclude others would exacerbate divisions and remove an opportunity for constructively engaging with these groups to challenge their views in so far as they prevented diverse groups living together peacefully.

Whilst seeing dialogue as important in developing relationships and mutual understanding, there were nevertheless concerns about what might be done if dialogue spaces were used to promote views which at least some people present perceived as oppressive. These can create situations where many policymakers and practitioners feel that they cannot do anything right (especially when deciding whether/how to intervene).

Even when communication across faiths and cultures is possible and sought by people of good will, there can be substantial debates about controversial issues such as what equality might mean, whether and how it might best be promoted, which may vary considerably between different perspectives. There will inevitably be continued differences of opinion about deep matters such as what different participants believe to be true, and how that relates to their everyday values and actions. This means recognising that there will be continued differences of understanding and disagreements within any dialogue, and developing shared ways of managing these together.

Conclusion

In dealing with these complex questions, it is therefore necessary to go beyond views which see professionals, policymakers and the state as somehow 'neutral' in the ways that they bring people together and get involved in these processes. Instead, this article has highlighted how *all* those involved in the process of interfaith dialogue (including those seeking to facilitate it) bring with them their own worldviews and values. They also bring their own different agendas and differences in positions of power and status in wider society, as well as memories and experiences of historical interactions with others. It is therefore crucial to recognise the power relations and ethical issues that are inherent aspects of practising in this field; this includes recognising the impact of the policymaker's/practitioner's own identity and position when trying to engage in or facilitate interfaith dialogue. Building relationships with others from different faith groups can also change the way that those involved are seen by others from within their own faith community. Engaging reflexively in such processes of dialogue can sometimes lead to questions being asked of those involved in dialogue which challenge their place within their own community, especially within particularly conservative or fundamentalist religious organisations. This means it is also important to recognise the potentially high personal cost which can affect those who try to build bridges with others through dialogue and action. However, in this article, I have argued that engaging with questions of effectiveness in interfaith dialogue requires participants to be willing and able to engage reflexively, critically and constructively with questions about the participants, purposes, processes and dilemmas within the dialogue process.

In response to such challenging questions and experiences, I would argue that it becomes all the more important that those seeking to build such important links for wider social cohesion are supported in their endeavours. The various policy and practice dimensions which underpin positive interfaith dialogue highlighted throughout this article provide suggested places to start. Helpful support could particularly include proactively creating environments in which positive interactions can begin and develop, whilst providing consistent support for activists, recognising the difficulties inherent in their role. This also includes providing opportunities to share experiences, helping them to be well trained and network with each other. Further developing theory and research in this field can play a key role in supporting policymakers and practitioners in evaluating and thinking critically about policies and practices, including identifying those which support cohesion and those which exacerbate division. As this article has sought to make clear, this means listening carefully to the full range of voices of those with the potential to be involved in each context, especially those who may not normally be heard.

Notes

1. Full details of the methodologies and methods involved in each of these different studies, the sources of funding and data in each case, and the related specific findings, can be found in the related publications cited.
2. None of the author's research engaged directly with the particular context in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, alternate research by Merdjanova and Brodeur (2011) directly addresses this particular context and was considered as part of these discussions; this similarly

supports the need for finer analysis in making policy and practice recommendations on interreligious dialogue, including considering the importance of the impact of local context on such dialogue.

3. The particular encounters referred to in this article took place in just a few of the wide range of international networks of policymakers, practitioners and/or academics which exist to engage in dialogue on related issues; other networks not involved in these particular dialogues, for example, include the European Network on Religion or Belief.
4. I explore a wide range of related theory from the disciplines of sociology, social psychology and social policy on this in Orton (2010), and its implications for the practice of policy-makers when integrating migrants in Orton (2012).
5. Of course, this does not necessarily mean all such claims should be accepted – there is rightly considerable debate about what should be normative and proper interpretation and application of a particular faith within the contemporary context.
6. Interestingly, Gaertner and Dovidio (2005, 83–84) also note that the growth in dual and hybrid identities has further complicated this process and subsequent related research evidence. They claim that 'a key element determining the impact of a dual identity on intergroup relations is likely what a dual identity signals – whether it is perceived as a sign of progress towards a desired goal or as a cue of threat.' (84) They also recognise the possibility of some forms of dual identities contributing to increased conflict in certain situations, specifically mentioning 'national crises in Ireland and the former Yugoslavia' as examples (84).
7. A striking practical example of this from my doctoral research was in an interfaith forum I attended which was meeting just as a local connection had been identified with the 7/7/05 London bombings. The trusting relationships built over a long period of time within this forum enabled the forum participants to respond swiftly to concerns about the potential for local riots and hate crimes against local Muslims. They quickly organised a range of joint initiatives, issuing a collective statement to national media condemning terrorism, organising a collective peace vigil on the City square that weekend, and made other offers of mutual support to help those who might otherwise be victimised as a result of these events. Another example was a collective residential training programme about intercultural interaction which linked together young activists, who could then use these links to organise sports games involving young people from different faith communities and different areas, and other opportunities for positive encounters.

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